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# Civic Physiques: Public Images of Workers in Pittsburgh, 1880-1910

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# *Civic Physiques: Public Images of Workers in Pittsburgh, 1880–1910*

The traveler approaching Pittsburgh for the first time at night by any of its rivers or railways may well imagine . . . that he is passing the picket-guard of the infernal regions, or going through some vast ordeal of fire. The landscape is all aglow before him in every direction. He will come suddenly upon one trailing monster which shall hold him with its glittering eye till he is passed on to the next.

*Every Saturday*, 18 March 1871

**R**ALPH KEELER'S 1871 IMPRESSION OF PITTSBURGH established disorientation as the strongest sensation for a first-time visitor. Keeler's *Every Saturday* article portrayed the city as a chaotic land of bright flashes, deafening noises, and constant motion. If Pittsburgh's residents appeared unfazed by the tumult around them, Keeler noted, it was because they had become inured to it by their daily experience of disorder. Outsiders would be overwhelmed by the sights and sounds that greeted them. The image of Pittsburgh as a city of confusion—a region devoted to the unchecked growth of monstrous industry—resonated in late-nineteenth-century travel accounts, government investigations, and labor commentaries. In 1892, the internationally reported violence of a local labor conflict further corrupted the city's public image. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* portrait of a town "red with blood" echoed elsewhere as reporters tried to place "such carnage" in the context of the "bloody history of riots in this vicinity." On the heels of the Homestead steel lockout, images of rampaging immigrant workers and working-class muscle suggested that Pittsburgh was home to an ominous working class, lying in wait and ready to lash out against any employer who challenged its control of the workplace. After the turn of the century, a sense of distraction and disunion pervaded many descrip-

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tions of the city. A writer for *Harper's Weekly* fancied in 1903: "It seems as if the fires of the subterranean regions were bursting through the earth's crust. A roar of charging machinery is in the air. It all means that Pittsburgh's industries never rest. Day and night they go on with thunder and fire and smoke."<sup>1</sup>

Alongside such visions of physical and social disturbance were more pleasant images that identified a coherent plot and an inspirational message in the Steel City narrative. In response to the dark image that emerged in these magazine features introducing the city to the nation and to press coverage of the Homestead lockout, the region's business elite began to adorn the city with representations that identified skilled work and the spectacular bodies that performed it as the keys to understanding Pittsburgh. Turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh was home to a set of civic projects designed to bring the worker's body (and its physical evidence of the rewards of challenging work) out from the obscurity of the industrial workplace and into such public venues as city thoroughfares, exposition halls, library courtyards, and museum foyers. Pittsburgh's boosters suffered particularly from a fear that the fragmentation of modern industrial society made it difficult to narrate daily life therein. The object of their promotional displays was to make the city knowable—to represent it with an easily recognizable symbol—by rendering one of its most hidden aspects visible. The male working figure would become a visual cue that both instructed middle-class residents and visitors in the transformative grandeur of hard work and assuaged Anglo-American workers' fears about their compromised position in the local labor market. Moreover, the display of working bodies followed artistic conventions that were greatly influenced by the political and economic interests of local industrialists. The idealized Pittsburgh worker was not a random figure in a mill but a highly selective creation characterized by denial and manipulation.

The turn-of-the-century manufacture of Pittsburgh civic images stands at the crossroads of three areas of recent historical interest—civic boosterism, urban visual display, and the relationship between gender and the body. Historians' work on American boosters has centered mainly on

<sup>1</sup> Ralph Keeler and Harry Fenn, "The Taking of Pittsburgh, Part III," *Every Saturday* (18 Mar. 1871), 262; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 6 July 1892, excerpted in *"The River Ran Red": Homestead, 1892*, ed. David P. Demarest Jr. (Pittsburgh, 1992), 75; "Pittsburgh, the Giant Industrial City of the World," *Harper's Weekly* 62 (23 May 1903): 842.

the efforts of western and southern business promoters to encourage commercial growth in the mid to late nineteenth century. Building upon the studies of Carl Abbott and Sally Griffith, historians have identified a “booster ethos”—a view of economic growth that placed social order at the center of small towns’ success. Relatively little attention, however, has been paid to boosters’ campaigns in the industrial cities of the Northeast during the era of massive industrialization. This boosterism was not that of small frontier towns seeking initial waves of settlers and investors. Instead, the efforts to promote Pittsburgh took place in a city that had already made a name for itself and attracted tremendous amounts of capital and labor. Local promoters focused on the cultivation of a cultural profile for their city that they hoped would add nuance to the prevailing view of Pittsburgh as a town obsessed with industrial output. Despite these differences in context, Pittsburgh’s boosters likewise stressed social order as the foundation of future prosperity. The working images they offered for public consumption were thus designed to elide evidence of disorder and division caused by rampant industrial change.<sup>2</sup>

The organizational heart of Pittsburgh boosterism, the Chamber of Commerce, was established in 1876. Created a year before the chaos of the 1877 railroad strike and sixteen years before the violence of the Homestead lockout, the Chamber of Commerce was guided by leaders who understood the negative power of unmanageable images of

<sup>2</sup> On boosterism in northern cities, see Sally F. Griffith, “Order, Discipline, and a few Cannon: Benjamin Franklin, the Association, and the Rhetoric and Practice of Boosterism,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 116 (1997): 131–55; L. Diane Barnes, “Booster Ethos: Community, Image, and Profit in Early Clarksburg,” *West Virginia History* 56 (1997): 27–42; Jean Spraker, “Come to the Carnival at Old St. Paul: Souvenirs from a Civic Ritual Interpreted,” *Prospects* 11 (1987): 233–46; and Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the “Emporia Gazette”* (New York, 1989). The role of boosterism in the growth of western and southern cities has been the focus of much scholarly study, including Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West* (Westport, Conn., 1981); Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860–1910* (Chapel Hill, 1990); David Hamer, *New Towns in the New World: Images and Perceptions of the Nineteenth-Century Urban Frontier* (New York, 1990); and Timothy R. Mahoney, “A Common Band of Brotherhood: Male Subculture, the Booster Ethos, and the Origins of Urban Social Order in the Midwest of the 1840s,” *Journal of Urban History* 25 (1999): 619–46. Two insightful works on Canadian cities are Paul-Andre Linteau, *The Promoters’ City: Building the Industrial Town of Maisonneuve, 1883–1918*, trans. Robert Chodos (Toronto, 1985), and Dominic T. Alessio, “Capitalist Realist Art: Industrial Images of Hamilton, Ontario, 1884–1910,” *Journal of Urban History* 18 (1992): 442–69. A broad comparative study of civic boosterism in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain is Stephen V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850–2000* (London, 1998).

Pittsburgh workers. A priority for the organization during its first thirty years, then, was the constant maintenance of a positive image of work in the Steel City.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the Chamber of Commerce were several organizations that shared in its quest to provide more amenable images to the public. The Committees of Reception, charged with attracting and coordinating commercial and industrial conferences in Pittsburgh, and the Western Pennsylvania Exposition Society, whose sole function was the execution of the yearly Pittsburgh Exposition, relied as much as the Chamber of Commerce on a civic image derived from the industrial workplace. The local establishment press also played a key role in efforts to promote the city by advertising civic events and trumpeting organizations' successes. The *Bulletin*, a weekly society paper, devoted itself to the cultivation of an appealing civic environment, constantly suggesting ways in which Pittsburghers could know their city and Pittsburgh could make itself known to America as a whole. By 1890 Pittsburgh's promotional apparatus had matured into a sophisticated constellation of voices united to sell the city to the rest of the nation.

Scholars studying the ways in which civic leaders have presented their cities through public spectacles have considered similar issues of social control. David Glassberg's seminal work on turn-of-the-century civic pageantry emphasized the struggle to "forge a united community of believers out of residents with diverse ethnic, class, and regional backgrounds." Glassberg argued that public displays merged the goals of boosters—comprised of the "economic, educational, and hereditary elite" of towns across the nation—with the goals of the artists and coordinators who carried out the performances. Whereas the latter sought a communal emotional experience to bolster individuals' sense of citizenship, the former hoped to build a spirit of social and political cooperation that would make urban industry and infrastructure more efficient. The desired goal was widespread identification with the city, not a specific class or ethnic group within the city. Tony Bennett's concept of an "exhibitionary complex"—a pattern of regular public spectacle that emerged in the nineteenth century—is most useful in understanding the relationship between display and power in industrial cities such as Pittsburgh. Bennett explained the exhibitionary complex as a technique of urban display that

<sup>3</sup> Edward White, in *One Hundred Fifty Years of Unparalleled Thrift* (Pittsburgh, 1908), noted that "Pittsburgh's principal development has been within the life of the Chamber, and it has been instrumental in placing the city in its proper position in the world of achievement."

sought the public's self-identification with the power of the capitalist. "Subjugated by flattery," city residents sided with the donors and directors of museums and exposition halls that offered the public an opportunity for participation and a sense of civic encouragement.<sup>4</sup>

Significantly for the case of Pittsburgh, the exhibitionary complex engaged with both middle-class and working-class audiences; techniques of display in the Steel City were meant to instruct workers about themselves while simultaneously introducing them to white-collar Pittsburghers. The image of work as a "community enterprise," rather than a site of class and ethnic conflict, depended upon presentations that took place in genial and celebratory contexts. Industrial exhibitions, public art works, and civic parades were all displays that garnered attention through a combination of booster hyperbole and the simple promise of an enjoyable show. By employing the city's middle class as an audience and workers as both audience and performers, Pittsburgh boosters were able to create work spectacles that were seemingly incontestable representations of what went on in local workplaces. The artifice behind these images was necessary to conform the realities of industrial work to middle-class expectations and skilled workers' traditional sense of artisanal identity.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, historians' attention to the nexus of masculinity and the body at the turn of the century has provided an analytical frame in which to consider these displays. Gail Bederman's *Manliness and Civilization* succeeded in showing that American middle-class manhood at the turn of the century was not a finite collection of attitudes and traits, but an ongoing process dependent upon men's public performances in both extraordinary and habitual contexts. Bederman's theory of a dynamic masculinity posited that class and racial identity were so invested in competing versions of what made a man "manly," that to study class, race, or gender in isolation missed the crucial connections between them. Other historians have shown how concern about the male body during this period

<sup>4</sup> David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 14, 31, 162, 284; Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton, 1994), 124, 130.

<sup>5</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence, Kans., 2002), 69, 89. Linkon and Russo write that in civic representations, work "could be seen as beneficial to body and spirit, yet such images could also serve to distract workers from concerns about safety or wages."

resulted in new popular models of manhood that stressed the physical conditioning of the body as an antidote to the increasingly sedentary life of the urban middle classes. Art historian Melissa Dabakis has argued that public labor sculptures also reified middle-class belief in a work ethic that promised social mobility and moral character to those who devoted themselves to steady labor. The idea of difficult manual work and the strong body it produced over time encouraged middle-class men to believe that there were still opportunities for white Americans to challenge themselves physically. It also suggested that, despite the well-publicized evidence of labor's animosity toward the capitalist system, skilled workers still equated manhood with hard work (and not labor militancy).<sup>6</sup>

The display of the male working body in Pittsburgh created a masculine image for the city that echoed skilled workers' claims to respectable manhood and conformed to elite men's desire for symbols of nonthreatening virility. According to the logic of these spectacles, the working bodies presented to the public were male because the city's "heavy" work environments were masculine domains, as was the industrial capitalism that heavy work was meant to symbolize. Manliness was commodified as an accessible and portable physical sign, one that revealed the wonders of the city as it linked Pittsburgh's future to the economic order erected there. As the drive for continued commercial growth placed a positive spin on even the darkest chapters in Pittsburgh's story, the protagonist throughout was the mythic worker capable of carrying a city on his back. His image allowed city boosters to turn the unknowable and elusive city into an appealing spectacle.

<sup>6</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995); Melissa Dabakis, *Visualizing Labor in American Sculpture: Monuments, Manliness, and the Work Ethic, 1880–1935* (Cambridge, 1999); E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770–1920," *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983): 28–29; John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York, 2001). Bederman builds upon a performative model of gender developed in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), 24–25. Butler writes, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." On the working lives of Pittsburgh's turn-of-the-century middle classes, see Ethel Spencer, *The Spencers of Amberson Avenue: A Turn-of-the-Century Memoir* (Pittsburgh, 1983), and Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, 1990), 176–77.

*An Image for an Elusive City*

Selling the city was not easy. The first task was to make the city legible to a burgeoning public. The earliest articles on industrial Pittsburgh in the national press treated it as an exotic specimen finally coming into the national spotlight. *Harper's* presented Pittsburgh as a "black spot on the map of Pennsylvania," akin to a drop of water that, when held under the lens of a microscope, "teems with life." The journalistic focus of the 1870s and 1880s recreated the experience of seeing the city for the first time, with its hills, rivers, and glowing fires. Keeler's five-part series in *Every Saturday* in the spring of 1871 presented a trip to the city as a reconnaissance mission for eastern readers who had never ventured into the wilds of southwestern Pennsylvania. The first article ended with a tantalizing glimpse of Pittsburgh; by the second installment, Keeler began to scout the city. City boosters attempted to turn in the late 1880s from depicting Pittsburgh's impressive, disorienting landscape to making a spectacle of the work that went on behind the closed doors of mills and factories. One way to accomplish this task was to bring people into the workplace to see for themselves; another was to bring the imagery of work out from the workplace and onto a public stage. City boosters used both techniques after the mid-1880s to give instruction about the meaning of Pittsburgh as it emerged as an industrial juggernaut.<sup>7</sup>

The need to explain the Steel City to outsiders became an obsession for those who believed that "no city in the country is so little understood by strangers." Local industrialist William Scaife railed in 1901 against "those who know the 'Smoky City' imperfectly, or only by reputation" as a sooty and desolate place. Another writer noted that "there are some things in nature and art that one cannot quite understand except by contact. In its modern attributes the city of Pittsburg seems to be one of these . . . there is an elusive element in its present state that cannot always be taken into account." The workplace was the ideal site for the visitor's "contact" with Pittsburgh. When the city celebrated itself with parades and pageants, observers noted that marching workers and industrial floats, while awe inspiring in themselves, were mere referents to hidden spectacles tucked away on a daily basis in thousands of local mills and factories. Journalists encouraged readers to use labor pageantry as the first

<sup>7</sup>"The City of Pittsburgh," *Harper's New Monthly* 62 (Dec. 1880): 50; Keeler and Fenn, "Taking of Pittsburgh," 262.



stage of getting better acquainted with Pittsburgh's heavy labor. The *Bulletin* advised locals that the city was a "vast school that should be more appreciated by its people, young and old."<sup>8</sup>

Boosters in the local press urged parents to take their children on industrial tours in order to show the youth of Pittsburgh the type of work that created industrial supremacy. Similarly, guidebook writers counseled tourists to place a trip to a steel mill or glass factory on the top of their Pittsburgh itineraries. If one wanted to know the city—to know it more deeply than a city of smoke and bustle—one could grasp its significance with a well-planned tour. Here was a lesson in work ethic, physical culture, and machine culture combined in a single venue. The *Bulletin* promoted a trip to a South Side glass works and to the Bessemer department of Carnegie Steel's Edgar Thompson Works as an exciting and educational lesson for children. Pedagogically, boosters touted the "matinee at the mills" as worth one hundred of the city's theaters. Fifteen years after it witnessed steelworkers and Pinkerton agents killing each other, the Homestead Works of the Carnegie Steel Company became a showcase of mechanized steel production in 1907. The company produced detailed plans of potential walking routes that allowed visitors to see the most appealing segments of production. Moreover, the *Pittsburgh Sun* reported that students from area technical schools toured steel plants as part of their manufacturing courses. Pittsburgh's workplaces, it seemed, had become a main attraction for tourists and scholars of modern industrial life.<sup>9</sup>

Yet several things were clear to both steel company executives and the booster press at the turn of the century. First, despite the frequent calls for more industrial touring, mills and factories were not filled to the rafters with visitors. By 1908, editors of the *Pittsburgh Sun* complained that Pittsburgh's schoolchildren still knew nothing about local industries,

<sup>8</sup> Erasmus Wilson, ed., *Standard History of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania* (Chicago, 1898), 971; William Lucien Scaife, "A Glimpse of Pittsburg," *Atlantic Monthly* 87 (Jan. 1901): 83; "The City of Pittsburg," *Harper's Weekly* 36 (27 Feb. 1892): 202; *Bulletin*, 20 Nov. 1890. The variant "Pittsburg" dates from the period 1891–1911, when the "h" was dropped from official spellings to follow standardization rules of the United States Geographic Board of Names. Throughout, I use the full form of the name but retain the shortened form in direct quotations and in the titles of books, pamphlets, and articles published between 1891 and 1911.

<sup>9</sup> *Bulletin*, 22 Nov. 1890, 12 June 1897; "Pittsburgh, the Giant Industrial City of the World," *Harper's Weekly* 47 (23 May 1903): 844; Carnegie Steel Company, "General Plan of Works Showing Course for Visitors to Follow through the Mill," 1907, in Gaughan Collection, Archives of Industrial Society, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh; *Pittsburgh Sun*, 21 Mar. 1910.

insisting that nothing was as educational as “a visit to as many local establishments as possible.” Teachers and middle-class parents were charged with educating the city’s youth in work-spectacles, yet few seemed to have accepted the duty. Secondly, if residents and visitors did tour mills on their own accord, they could read the scenes they saw within in strikingly different ways. The *Sun* admitted that a tour of an industrial establishment without a well-trained guide could be useless to the uninitiated, as educational as attending a lecture in a foreign language. For tourist-students to learn about Pittsburgh from viewing its work, they first had to learn a language that would allow them to appreciate what they saw and to analyze work-spectacles with the tools of a connoisseur. For both the person who would not venture into mills and the person who did so without the appropriate script, city boosters created a collection of texts and a series of exhibitionary forms meant to bring the message of the spectacular workplace into public life.<sup>10</sup>

The perfect image for the city could not be *any* industrial worker, for Pittsburgh’s boosters had more in mind than an emphasis on muscle alone. Instead, they wanted to show that the city “once symbolic only for the things which are the product of man’s muscle and mechanical skill” could also stake its claim to a higher symbolism, combining muscle with brain, strength with artistic intellect. Boosters were members of the city’s cultural elite, men and women who envisioned a national role for Pittsburgh in fashionable society. In addition to funding institutions that promoted the arts, boosters hoped to spread a more genteel image of the city’s industry. This effort centered on the figure of the capable, creative worker. The unskilled worker was not enough, nor was the image of the skilled worker who let a machine do much of the work for him. Both of these figures, endemic to the increasingly mechanized industry of turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh, were distanced from work tasks that had traditionally appealed to social critics and popular audiences as marvelous spectacles. The best man for the job and the best image for the city was that which combined “the highest skill of the chemist, the largest courage of the capitalist and manufacturer, as well as the brawn of the highest developed form of the American working-man.” The iron puddler and the glassblower demonstrated these valuable features every time they judged the quality of their batch, directed their helpers’ work, and hefted heavy masses of iron and glass. Scaife stressed that the “real meaning and

<sup>10</sup> *Pittsburgh Sun*, 21 Oct. 1908.

mission” of Pittsburgh at the turn of the century was “the conquest of nature by intelligent energy.”<sup>11</sup>

Puddling and blowing demanded “not only different muscles of the body, but different faculties of the mind.” The romance of puddling emanated from both the incredible strength that puddlers displayed and their deep knowledge of the chemistry behind the “miniature volcanoes in constant eruption.” Window glassblowing exhibited strength and grace as workers swung cylinders around them. Moreover, in both work processes, the worker’s body was the fulcrum upon which metal and glass turned, coming into focus during its time of proximity to the glowing materials it worked. Both processes produced goods, but these were also physical ordeals to be admired. The puddler who possessed “great muscular skill like that of the heavyweight wrestler” or the blower who had to drink four gallons of water each day to replace his body’s perspiration offered visions of noble sacrifice in the name of manufacturing. A *Harper’s* reporter watched a window glassblower at work for a few minutes and was “puzzled which to most admire, cause or effect, workman or work.” Pittsburgh boosters intensified this dilemma in their promotional campaigns, using working bodies to stand in for the astounding tasks that they performed.<sup>12</sup>

City boosters were not the only ones invested in images of puddlers and blowers as representatives of Pittsburgh industry. As Michael Santos has shown, puddlers and blowers themselves clung to their craft as the “one clearly identifiable source of class identity they had left.” Steel triumphed over iron in late-nineteenth-century Pittsburgh precisely because it could be made with machinery that did not rely on the skills of highly paid puddlers. During the 1890s, steel manufacturers in Pittsburgh dismantled puddling furnaces in order to expand their steel production facilities; newspaper reports of puddlers being dismissed from area mills appeared frequently throughout the decade. After wages, union leverage, and self-regulation had been compromised by mechanization, the technical and physical difficulty of their occupation was workers’ sole remaining claim to respect and power within the Pittsburgh labor force. The exer-

<sup>11</sup> Burd Shippen Patterson, “The Aesthetic and Intellectual Side of Pittsburg,” *Review of Reviews* 31 (Jan. 1905): 67; “Pittsburgh, the Giant Industrial City of the World,” 844; Scaife, “A Glimpse of Pittsburg,” 83.

<sup>12</sup> George E. McNeill, ed., *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-Day* (Boston, 1887), 477; “The City of Pittsburgh,” 57, 64; James Davis, *The Iron Puddler: My Life in the Rolling Mills and What Came of It* (New York, 1922), 92; Keeler and Fenn, “Taking of Pittsburgh,” 262.

tion required to make metal and glass in the traditional method marked the work as a distinctly masculine domain. In the late nineteenth century, as work tasks formerly monopolized by men were increasingly performed by women and even children, a reinforcement of the gendered language of certain occupations occurred. Specific groups of working men throughout the nation envisioned their work—whether it was lumbering in the forests of New England, cattle-handling in the western plains, or tonnage work in steel and glass—as the pinnacle of new hierarchies of labor.<sup>13</sup>

Thus even while Pittsburgh employers fired puddlers by the score and introduced mechanized blowing after the turn of the century, workers' symbolic currency became more valuable as a mark of working-class manhood and as an image for the city. Skilled work became less important in production, but the idea of skilled work remained essential to the elite's vision of "Pittsburgh the Powerful." Puddlers' and blowers' bodies became a convenient shorthand for an ideal form of marketable work—skilled, heavy, and artistic. The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers' *Amalgamated Journal* noted the conceptual generalization of the puddler's work after the turn of the century, when the label "puddler" started being used "in every sense in which man's sturdier qualities and industry are sought to be emphasized." Referring to various industrial workers as puddlers was not simply a sign of journalistic carelessness. Instead, the misappellation was a result of a pervasive way of thinking about work in Pittsburgh, fueled by boosters' two-decade effort to imagine that all of the city's workers might exhibit the same physical skill and rugged nobility that made puddlers objects of intense interest.<sup>14</sup>

Underlying much of the investment in the heavy work of puddlers and glassblowers were turn-of-the-century concerns about the detrimental effects of mechanical modern civilization. Throughout the nation social commentators voiced dire predictions about the fate of American health and manhood should the office replace the industrial workshop as the primary environment in which men spent their days. In 1889 William Blaikie asked the startling question, "Is American stamina declining?" The answer, according to many writers who scrutinized the trends of urban life, was yes. City life, with its streetcars, administrative careers, and

<sup>13</sup> Michael Santos, "Between Hegemony and Autonomy: The Skilled Iron Workers' Search for Identity, 1900–1930," *Labor History* 35 (1994): 403. On the masculinization of work in the late nineteenth century, see commentary in Dee Garceau, *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, 1880–1929* (Lincoln, Neb., 1997).

<sup>14</sup> *Amalgamated Journal*, 4 Dec. 1902.

commercial comforts, made urban middle-class men soft, unaccustomed to the physical difficulties that had hardened their pioneer ancestors. In the logic of what Bederman has called a “widespread cultural concern about effeminacy, overcivilization, and racial decadence,” excessive exertion of a man’s mental faculties drained his body’s physical power. Industrial workers offered some solace to those who envisioned the physical weakening that accompanied white-collar employment, but even work in industry seemed compromised by recent changes. Some middle-class Pittsburghers worried that the labor-saving machinery that had transformed the city had eased the strain of the skilled worker to such an extent that he was “not bodily the man his grandfather was.” If the ironworker of 1860 was stronger than the steelworker of 1900 it was because the work process had asked more of his body in the era before mechanization. The skilled worker’s less rigorous workday could be troubling to middle-class men who viewed their own professional or clerical careers with ambivalence. Work in the Steel City was hard, but in the era of mechanization some visitors to mills and factories wondered if it was hard enough.<sup>15</sup>

The first step in the symbolic rehabilitation of the Pittsburgh worker’s body was an optimistic vision of the pace at which it worked. A swift and worrying pace governed modern life, but boosters indicated that it was possible to master it. The swift pace of life in Pittsburgh struck many observers as a key ingredient in its industrial success. In 1890 the *Bulletin* noted that “the idle man . . . must feel out of place, if not positively uncomfortable in Pittsburg. There is no other city of its dimensions in the country that has as little that can be termed repose.” Scaife agreed that Pittsburgh “has never had a leisure class,” but instead various social strata all devoted to constant industry. The lack of rest could be a bragging point only if residents prospered in spite (or because) of it. A writer for *Harper’s* claimed in 1880 that the “true Pittsburgher” reveled in the growing reputation of the city as a smoky and grimy center of difficult, relentless work. Authenticity in the Steel City, then, depended as much on a tendency to applaud hard work as an ability to withstand it. Frequent denials of idleness served as a backhand slap against other cities in the United States that suffered from the “tramp problem” in the 1880s and 1890s. The migrant, unskilled laborer who worked seasonally until he had

<sup>15</sup> William Blaikie, “Is American Stamina Declining?” *Harper’s Monthly* 79 (July 1889): 242; Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 185. The turn-of-the-century preoccupation with sports and primitivism in America depended upon the hope that such practices might build the body and the character in a way previously ascribed to work. See Rotundo, “Body and Soul,” 28–29.

enough money to enjoy a few months of idleness could not exist in Pittsburgh, boosters reasoned. The work there was challenging enough to attract only those men who pursued it both for its financial prospects and its physical benefits. One writer explained that “not the prospect of ease and rest, but that of work which means independence and mastery, wins to-day the emigrant from the East.” Idlers fled the city; workers remained. Boosters stressed the manliness of Pittsburgh puddlers and glassblowers based on their ability to cope with the extreme strain of their work.<sup>16</sup>

A second weapon in the boosters' arsenal was a sympathetic vision of work that took place in close proximity to machinery. When residents and visitors to Pittsburgh forayed into mills and factories, they found grand machinery and working bodies combined in a single spectacle. Machinery loomed in industrial workplaces, but city celebrants downplayed the intimidating aspects of its size and force to empower the relatively small worker. Part of puddlers' and blowers' appeal during this time was their ability to defy the mechanical encroachment for much of the nineteenth century—these were men who did not need machines to help them and, seemingly, could never be replaced by them. Yet when machinery did make inroads into the Pittsburgh workplace, city boosters accommodated their beliefs about work to the exigencies of a mechanical world. Successful promotion of the Steel City relied upon a faith that mechanization of work would not destroy the worker's body or its place in manufacturing. Instead, boosters suggested that machines accentuated men's physical abilities and allowed them to focus on their demanding tasks. If Pittsburgh workers were masters of raw materials and difficult processes, then cranes, rollers, and blowers that towered above them were mere helpers, attached to their masters with chains and levers and ready to do their bidding. Beginning in the 1870s, city guidebooks trumpeted the harmony in which workers and machinery coexisted in Pittsburgh, depicting them as “the various corps of a well-ordered army” that complemented each other. The key for employers was not to make workers and machines compete, but to manage the “wonderful co-operation of ponderous perfected machinery with trained muscle.” Turn-of-the-century glassblowing machinery lifted glowing cylinders of molten glass to impossible heights at the beck and call of a single man. In the Homestead

<sup>16</sup> *Bulletin*, 29 Nov. 1890; Scaife, “A Glimpse of Pittsburg,” 85; “The City of Pittsburgh,” 57; Lillian W. Betts, “Pittsburg: A City of Brain and Brawn,” *Outlook* 69 (7 Sept. 1901): 17.

Steel Works, where one visitor watched “machines endowed with the strength of a hundred giants move obedient to a touch,” a pair of trolleys and cranes known as “Leviathan and Behemoth” responded to the skilled hands of only a few steelworkers.<sup>17</sup>

Once the machine had been rendered innocuous, writers could focus their attention squarely on the worker’s body. Journalists searched for words to describe workers’ motions and feats. Even Hamlin Garland, who traveled to the area to expose its deficiencies as an industrial community, was exhilarated by the sight of working men. As Garland watched steelworkers move about a fiery mill, he “could not help admiring the swift and splendid action of their bodies.” Workers comported themselves with a grace and fluidity that made them one with the process around them, and their bodies mirrored the materials with which they worked daily. Conceding to the writer’s pressure to prove his strength, a steelworker offered Garland his arm to feel his muscles. The worker’s arm was “like a billet of steel,” his stomach, thick and firm “like a sheet of boiler iron.” Puddler-turned-secretary of labor James Davis described puddlers as “half-naked, soot-smearred fellows” who worked incessantly while sweat ran down their bare backs and arms. A convenience for the worker, the practice of stripping to the waist allowed writers to focus on torsos as barometers of the exertion required in heavy work. The son of an American Iron and Steel Works’ chief engineer recalled his first trip to a puddling department as an education in the adult world of industry. The scene of rapid action, fiery heat, and extreme strength struck him as a unique show of human physical limits, with the puddler as the main character and his work as the plot. The young visitor’s reaction to the spectacle centered on puddlers’ exposed bodies: “From where I stood I could see the puddlers. . . . It was a hot afternoon and most of the men were working without their shirts, and it was a sight for me to see so many big husky men running about half-naked.”<sup>18</sup>

Although one visitor to Pittsburgh concluded that the “American working man conforms to no fixed type,” the physique that city boosters

<sup>17</sup> “The City of Pittsburgh,” 59, 64; George H. Thurston, *All about Pittsburgh and Allegheny* (Pittsburgh, 1876), 113; James Howard Bridge, *The Inside History of the Carnegie Steel Company: A Romance of Millions* (New York, 1903), 164.

<sup>18</sup> Hamlin Garland, “Homestead and Its Perilous Trades,” *McClure’s Magazine* 3 (June 1894): 6, 8; Davis, *Iron Puddler*, 85; “The American Iron and Steel Works of the Jones and Laughlin Company,” (1867), in Jones and Laughlin Company manuscript collection, Library and Archives Division, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh, Pa.

promoted before the turn of the century was very much a white, Anglo-American body. When guidebooks praised the physical abilities of the “progressive, intelligent” portion of the local population, they referred to native-born and immigrant residents who had settled in Pittsburgh before the post-1880 wave of immigration from southern and eastern Europe. New immigrants’ bodies were just as strong as those of established Pittsburghers (one writer went as far as noting that “they seemed to be made of iron”), but they were, to use Davis’s analogy, like pig iron that had not yet been worked sufficiently into a better product. When the narrator of *Hammers of Hell*, a novel of the Pittsburgh steel industry, toured “Hunkietown,” a working-class immigrant neighborhood clustered around a steel mill, he could barely draw his gaze away from the “massive, pillar-like thighs” of the men who lived there. Social reformer Edwin Bjorkman wrote that new immigrants possessed “health and strength beyond ordinary measure.” The problem was not so much strength as the way in which that strength was employed; common laborers had no craft in which they could cultivate their muscles and mass into the tools of an artisan. Class and ethnicity intertwined in such a way to make Anglo-American, skilled, working-class manhood the civic ideal and Slavic, unskilled, working-class manhood an inferior identity.<sup>19</sup>

Boosters’ slight-of-hand—praising the advantages of the machine, but simultaneously implying that it had not changed the essence of work in Pittsburgh; and focusing on Anglo-American workers as representatives of industries that employed great proportions of men from southern and eastern Europe—served as a convenient way to elude problems of mechanical deskilling and immigrant labor. Mechanized production processes reduced the amount of “hands-on” skill required of workers, and promotional writers in the Steel City responded to this change by virtually ignoring it. As mill tourists set foot in industrial workplaces, however, the nature of unskilled work could hardly escape notice, and the lessons of work in Pittsburgh were essentially up for grabs. Skilled work tasks were only a minor part of the production processes of mechanized industrial establishments; while civic tour guides pointed to the puddler or the

<sup>19</sup> Frank Popplewell, *Some Modern Conditions and Recent Developments in Iron and Steel Production in America* (Manchester, U.K., 1906), 107; J. M. Kelly’s *Handbook of Greater Pittsburg* (Pittsburgh, 1895); Henry Edward Rood, *The Company Doctor: An American Story* (New York, 1895), 225; W. E. Trautmann and Peter Hagboldt, *Hammers of Hell* (Chicago, 1921), 60; Edwin Bjorkman, “What Industrial Civilization May Do to Men,” *World’s Work* 17 (Apr. 1909): 11491.



blower, the eyes of mill tourists wandered to unskilled labor gangs or the semiskilled machine-tenders who shared the work floor. The problem for city boosters, then, was one of both production and distribution. The local business elite brought more controlled images of work in Pittsburgh to the civic audience by staging work-spectacles beyond the mill gates and factory doors. Beginning with the Pittsburgh Exposition of 1889 and culminating with the city's sesquicentennial celebration in 1908, civic promoters exhibited work in Pittsburgh as an ideal ornament for the city's public spaces.

*"All that is Interesting and Attractive": The Pittsburgh Exposition*

When the city's exposition buildings burned to the ground in 1883, local hopes for an annual display of manufactured goods to promote Pittsburgh's industries seemed to go up in smoke with them. The fire halted the plans of the Western Pennsylvania Exposition Society (WPES) to exhibit Pittsburgh to the world. The fact that a twenty-year run of annual exhibitions began several years later was a testament to the WPES's determination to "advance Pittsburgh's industries" with a yearly show to stimulate business interest in the region. After several years of fundraising the society erected large buildings in the heart of the city's downtown and held the first official Pittsburgh Exposition in 1889. The WPES—funded and directed by representatives from every major manufacturer, banker, and merchant in Pittsburgh—announced itself as a "general educator of the masses," hoping for large crowds each year to prove that its pedagogical reach did the city's industries justice. Boosters who supported the WPES stressed the grand scheme into which the commercial showcase fit. One souvenir book noted that the "primary object of the Exposition is to make all who visit Pittsburg acquainted with the vast resources of the city, and to demonstrate in the most practical manner the full measure of their development. In no other way," the writer concluded, "can the world be given an opportunity to form an adequate conception of the progress we have made, or the degree of perfection our artisans reached." The *Commercial Gazette* boasted that regional manufacturers and workers now enjoyed "a common bazaar" to display "all that is novel and useful, all that is interesting and attractive, all that is beautiful and artistic." Over six hundred workers and representatives

of commercial firms gathered each year to exhibit their wares and services. The Exposition epitomized boosters' cultural goals, bringing together art collections, musical performances, and lectures while also placing work in the public spotlight.<sup>20</sup>

For its first five years, the highlight of the Exposition was a glass-making exhibit in Mechanical Hall that featured workers blowing and shaping glass for the delight of the crowd. Each night, workers moved around scaled-down versions of melting furnaces, blowing and shaping globs of molten glass into lamp chimneys. The crowds surrounding the blowing exhibit were often so large that only a fraction of the audience could actually see the work process. Visitors vied for the best positions as men gathered small batches of glass, blew them into cylindrical shapes, and carved their ends to make three-foot-long ornamental chimneys. The popularity of the glassblowers proved to the editors of the *Bulletin* that more mechanical and labor displays were needed in Mechanical Hall. As Pennsylvania's secretary of internal affairs noted, glassblowing was considered one of the "finest, most interesting, and fascinating operations" of Pittsburgh industry. The operation quickly became a popular reason for middle-class Pittsburghers to attend the Exposition, generating ticket sales and press coverage for what was an otherwise typical display of mechanical devices and consumer products. Glassmaking featured aspects of physical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic education that the WPES tried to highlight as indicative of life in industrial Pittsburgh. The glass exhibit, "quivering with life and motion," rose above the rest of the exhibits as its stacks and furnaces stood like "monarchs of the show." Workers who "rolled and plunged and twisted the heavy tongs into the seething mass" of molten glass were masters of the display. The WPES prided itself on the "practical work" exhibited by the glassblowers, an important step beyond the presentation of products that comprised the majority of the Exposition. A trip to Mechanical Hall was meant to immerse visitors in an ideal vision of industry in which products were plentiful, machinery was pleasing,

<sup>20</sup> Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City* (Pittsburgh, 1938), 342; *Bulletin*, 8 Dec. 1888, 25 Oct. 1890; *Pittsburg and Its Exposition* (Pittsburgh, 1889), 5; *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, 6 Sept. 1889; WPES, *Pittsburg and Its Fifth Annual Exposition* (Pittsburgh, 1893), 7. All of Pittsburgh's major steel, glass, and coal companies funded the annual event and took part in its planning process throughout the year. For a list of firms involved, see Pittsburg Exposition Society, "Partial List of Citizens, Firms, and Corporations, All Eligible to Life Membership in the Pittsburg Exposition Society," (n.d.), Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

and even practical work was spectacular.<sup>21</sup>

As Keith Walden has observed, industrial exhibitions in North America in the late nineteenth century were designed to “engineer consent” to a positive vision of industry as an inherent and inspirational part of modern life. Exhibitions were not mirrors of an economic and political reality, but “agents of change, creating by participation and not coercion a sense of natural order, consensus, and hierarchy.” The exhibition of men working glass relied heavily not only on the display of boosters’ idealized vision of work, but also the public’s reception of the display. The Pittsburgh Exposition transformed the notion of working bodies as symbols of progress and city pride into a collective experience; participation in the event made the people of Pittsburgh and the city’s guests part of the display’s power. The first Exposition in 1889 attracted 561,000 people in its five-week run. Roughly 300,000 people flocked each year to the remaining four events held before 1895. Though these crowds were primarily comprised of elite and middle-class visitors, there were opportunities for working-class Pittsburghers to attend as well. Each Saturday was “People’s Day” at the Exposition, free to the masses and intended to impress upon working-class Pittsburghers the significance of their city. The dialogue of the glassmaking exhibit was thus tripartite, taking place between the performers and the middle-class audience, between the performers and the working-class audience, and between the different elements of the audience. The *Bulletin* reported that “from the time when the first glass blower takes his place, this pretty factory is surrounded by a crowd of deeply interested spectators . . . absorbed in the spectacle.” To be absorbed in the spectacle, one would presumably have to be unaccustomed to the glassblowing process or enthralled by the event itself. The large crowds were crucial to the meaning of the exhibition; as visitors elbowed their way forward to see the physical art of glassmaking, they were taught a valuable lesson in the powerful appeal of working bodies. As work became a performance for a crowd, the worker’s body became central to the plot, intimating all that happened behind mill and factory

<sup>21</sup> WPES, *Exposition Handbook and Guide* (Pittsburgh, 1890), 40; *Bulletin*, 22 Nov. 1890, 25 Oct. 1890; Secretary of Internal Affairs of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, *Annual Report, Part III: Industrial Statistics* (Harrisburg, 1900), 22 (hereafter cited as SIACP); *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, 6 Sept. 1890, 7 Sept. 1891. Although many glass companies participated in the display—Thomas Evans and Company, Dithridge and Company, George MacBeth and Company, Ripley and Company, and George Duncan and Sons, to name a few—press responses to the exhibit mentioned nothing about the workers’ connection to an employer. Instead, writers adopted them as the sons of Pittsburgh, whose wonderful work could not be owned by any firm.

doors. This was not industry, which required no audience in order to function, but performance, which relied on the appreciative crowd to sanctify glassblowers' work. Here was work placed on a pedestal, roped off in a corner of Mechanical Hall for all the world to see.<sup>22</sup>

For editors of the *Bulletin*, the glassmaking exhibit was a welcome glimpse of the elusive heart of Pittsburgh industry, but it also revealed the limits of transferring the city's heavy industrial work into a portable work-spectacle. In a series of criticisms throughout the 1890s, the *Bulletin* encouraged the WPES to build upon the success of the exhibit with more variety and scope. If, for instance, the Exposition could bring glassworkers into the public spotlight, why were ironworkers still left in the shadows? Writers urged that "a showing, in miniature, of the wonderful processes going on in Pittsburg's mills," would "invest Mechanical Hall with an attribute that would make of it a reflex of the city's industries; and, as such, unique and characteristic." The argument was clear—the Pittsburgh Exposition could only be representative of Pittsburgh if it displayed work processes of its major industries, the work that had produced its wealth. Every city generated a surplus of products to display in an exposition, but only Pittsburgh had earned the right to show skilled working bodies in all their rugged grandeur. Performances would necessarily be smaller versions of the real thing, but the attractiveness of bodies at work would translate some of its significance in any setting. As an alternative to a visit to the industrial workplace, a "pre-eminently Pittsburg Exposition" could offer visitors a "more correct idea" of the city than they had ever imagined.<sup>23</sup>

### *The Art of Work*

A second strategy to stage work for public consumption emerged in the Steel City toward the turn of the century. Commissioned artists focused several times in the next decade on the working figure as a symbol of the city, emphasizing a subtle faith in the male body as a product

<sup>22</sup> Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto, 1997), 15; Bennett, "Exhibitionary Complex," 128; Peter H. Hoffenberg, "Exhibitions and the New Imperialism," in *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, Calif., 2001), 27; WPES, *Report of the President and Treasurer for the Year 1897* (Pittsburgh, 1897); *Bulletin*, 13 Sept. 1890.

<sup>23</sup> *Bulletin*, 25 Oct. 1890, 29 Oct. 1892, 12 June 1897.

of local history and an anchor in a time of flux. Decades of heavy industrial work in Pittsburgh created both products used throughout the world and muscular men with broad shoulders, solid backs, and unyielding arms. Public art brought this message to the city's edifices in an explicit way, joining patrons' desire for impressive ornament, boosters' model of work as self-promotion, and artists' belief that art could function as "a public and municipal educator." Echoing the widespread turn-of-the-century belief that images swayed the masses more than text, public art became an arena for further teaching about Pittsburgh. Several prominent commissions awarded after 1895 emphasized workers' bodies as vehicles for municipal education. When the finished works were unveiled, Pittsburghers discovered that the artists, two of the nation's most renowned, had removed metal workers from the industrial workplace to frame them in allegorical and ethereal contexts. For the representative worker to be a figure that could elicit pride in the city, his work apparently had to be elided from public view. Labor itself was beside the point, because it raised questions of deskilling and exploitation that could only complicate boosters' position; thus, these two works suggest the manipulative aspects of representation in Pittsburgh after the mechanization of production.<sup>24</sup>

Edwin Blashfield's mural *Pittsburg Offering Its Iron and Steel to the World* was the first major work of public art in Pittsburgh that glorified laborer's bodies as civic symbols. The Bank of Pittsburgh commissioned Blashfield's nine-by-nineteen-foot work for its main lobby in 1898. The centerpiece of the mural was Pittsburgh, a female allegorical figure who sat atop a throne emblazoned with the word "IRON." Her arms spread widely, presented a dozen male figures on either side of her who represented the city's industrial workforce. The two workers nearest the center of the mural were typical images of metal workers, stripped to the waist, displaying arms and chests rippled with muscles, and holding long hammers in front of them. The paleness of their developed bodies was accentuated by shadows and mist in the mural's background, making their musculature and whiteness equally significant cues of their privileged status in Pittsburgh labor. In the foreground, a plaque read "The city of

<sup>24</sup> Edwin Howland Blashfield, *Mural Painting in America* (New York, 1913), 24; Trudy Baltz, "Pageantry and Mural Painting: Community Rituals in Allegorical Form," *Winterthur Portfolio* 15 (1980): 220. On the bodily conventions of late-nineteenth-century American art, see David Bjelajac, "Art and Commerce in the Gilded Age, 1865–1905," in *American Art: A Cultural History* (New York, 2001), esp. 256.

Pittsburg offers its iron and steel to the commerce, industry, navigation, and agriculture of the world.” Yet, the only evidence of iron or steel in the painting were a few implements scattered throughout the assembled figures. Apart from the men’s hammers, only a sword, a scythe, a surveyor’s scope, and a plaque heralding mining machinery represented the city’s contributions. The visual relationship between the central figure and the surrounding workers suggested that they, too, were part of Pittsburgh’s gift to the world; both the products that kept the world’s market running and the bodies of the men who produced them were made of steel.<sup>25</sup>

Working men’s bodies in Blashfield’s mural were more than referents to notions of classical beauty and physical inheritance. Blashfield urged his fellow public artists to use their interest in classical bodies to find counterparts in American culture and configure modern scenes of work that relied upon current themes. The men he painted in Pittsburgh were not Greek figures transplanted into a scene of modern industry. Instead, they were Pittsburgh figures whose bodies evinced a modern work ethic with their flawless physiques. The distinction was key to Blashfield; in 1913 he explained his dedication to modern working bodies as signs of American contributions to the world: “No matter how enthusiastically we have studied the nude body, as presented in the broken fragments from Greek pediments or the marbles of Michelangelo, the muscles of Raphael’s tritons and nymphs, the glowing canvases of Venice, the bronzes of Donatello, we must remember that naked bodies bow themselves to dig *our* trenches and puddle *our* steel, work among *us* to-day, and are as interesting now under the American sun or in the firelight of the foundries.” Worthy of the artist’s scrutiny, bodies that revealed themselves in Pittsburgh’s workplaces stood in for the work they performed.<sup>26</sup>

Blashfield established the manliness of these half-naked bodies with visual cues of the work they performed. Their unclad bodies, their handling of heavy tools, and their contrast with the surrounding murkiness alerted viewers that these were men to admire. The workers’ lack of clothing alluded to the punishing heat of the workplace, but more importantly put their physiques on display. The hammers in the mural represented a prevailing image of skilled labor in the nineteenth century. American

<sup>25</sup> See Pauline King’s critique of the mural in *American Mural Painting* (Boston, 1902), 252–53. Blashfield had earned his name earlier in the decade for his work at the Chicago World’s Fair and in the Library of Congress. See Leonard N. Amico, *The Mural Decorations of Edwin Howland Blashfield* (Williamstown, Mass., 1978) and King, *Ibid.*, 72, 198.

<sup>26</sup> Blashfield, *Mural Painting in America*, 199. Emphasis in the original.

craftsmen had long wielded the tools of their trades in public ceremonies to symbolize their monopoly of skill. The ability to use a hammer with power *and* control separated these figures from the nation's laboring masses. Finally, the striking whiteness of Blashfield's men drew the viewer's attention to them as the focal point of Pittsburgh's gift to the world. Blashfield noted that images in murals should serve as "beacons in history" to remind the people of their civic identity in times of swift change. Whiteness in the Bank of Pittsburgh mural was both a visual beacon within the composition and a plot line for local history. Anglo-American efforts were the basis of the city's contributions to civilization, boosters argued, because white identity was the one thing that connected Pittsburgh's skilled labor force to elites, professionals, and office employees.<sup>27</sup>

The murals' reference to physique, skill, and ethnicity appealed to the artists' commercial patrons. As a muralist of public and semipublic spaces, Blashfield believed that decorative art must harmonize with the functions of the buildings it adorned. A mural in a bank gave the artist the opportunity to connect the civic significance of financial institutions with the necessity of the Steel City's hard work. One of the Bank of Pittsburgh's rival institutions described banking as "the groundwork of civilization—the underlying principle which sways the destinies of nations and furnishes the material uplift for mankind." If Pittsburgh was the "center of the industrial world, the hub of the wheels of business," then banks supplied the financial resources that allowed the city's industries to lead the world forward. The steel magnate, the industrial worker, and the banker were thus partners, helping each other succeed in the grand project of civilization. Bank of Pittsburgh administrators admired Blashfield's mural to such an extent that they reproduced the image on their yearly reports in the late 1890s and early 1900s. They chose to represent their firm not with images of banking, but with the stripped bodies of white working men, offered to the world as an appealing by-product of heavy labor.<sup>28</sup>

Nine years after Blashfield adorned the Bank of Pittsburgh's lobby, another set of painted walls enraptured Pittsburgh boosters. The most significant presentation of labor art in Pittsburgh in the first decade of the

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 4; Union Trust Company of Pittsburgh, *Industrial Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1908), 20, 56; King, *American Mural Painting*, 255. For a similar emphasis on rapport between building and mural, see "Mural Painting in American Cities," *Scribner's* 25 (1899): 125–28.

twentieth century was John White Alexander's collection of murals in the main entrance of the Carnegie Institute. Alexander completed the commissioned murals for the expanded institute's dedication ceremonies in April 1907. *The Crowning of Labor* consisted of two main parts, a series of fifteen panels on the ground floor titled "Labor" and a mural on the second floor of the institute's main stairway titled "The Apotheosis of Pittsburgh." In painting the work figures for the "Labor" panels on the ground floor, Alexander remained visually vague—men were caught in the act of performing work, but the work itself was invisible, hidden in shadows and smoke. Many of the workers' torsos were at extreme angles to each other as groups of men pushed carts and pulled on chains. Visitors to the institute saw workers stretching, leaning, and bending amid a generic form of industry in which steel girders, cranes, and pulleys abounded but the actual product of the implied work was not apparent. Thirty-two of Alexander's workers were stripped to the waist, letting the glare of molten steel shine off their bared shoulders and backs. Their faces were mostly covered in shadows, although three figures stared directly at the viewer, revealing what the art critic for the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* called the archetypal "Mill-man face"—an emotionless visage absorbed in work. In the upper "Apotheosis of Pittsburgh" portion of the mural, Alexander represented the city as an armored knight, floating through the air and receiving a crown from an angelic female figure. Around the knight young women hovered, carrying "gifts of cunning craftsmanship" from all corners of the world. The spatial relationship between the two halves of the mural suggested a sense of admirable working-class sacrifice—workers toiled below for the glory of the city above. The city itself was able to rise over the smoke and steam of its workshops to accept the world's praise for all that workers delivered. Alexander's mural thus complemented Blashfield's work; Pittsburgh and the world exchanged a bounty of iron and steel for acclaim and investment while the city's hardened working men kept working.<sup>29</sup>

At the turn of the century, Alexander was well known as one of the Steel City's most popular and perceptive sons. Having spent his childhood in Pittsburgh in the 1860s, he recalled mill scenes and used them as a template for his art. *Mentor* magazine noted that he "had a first-hand

<sup>29</sup> *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 7 Apr. 1907; Charles H. Caffin, "The New Mural Decorations of John W. Alexander," *Harper's Monthly* 114 (May 1907): 847. The most thorough analysis of Alexander's murals is Sarah J. Moore, "John White Alexander (1856–1915): In Search of the Decorative" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1992), 309–25.



knowledge of the somber side of the great iron and steel works." An appreciation for the somber side of industry partially explained the shadows and gloom with which the artist surrounded his mill workers. Another explanation related to Alexander's goal of presenting a concept of work rather than a literal representation. The expansion of Andrew Carnegie's arts and sciences institution was meant to vault Pittsburgh to the forefront of urban cultural life. Like the Pittsburgh Exposition, the Carnegie Institute featured displays and performances designed to add genteel nuance to the "Workshop of the World." The vision of work conveyed in "Labor" accomplished this by presenting the industrial workday as an impressionistic collage of glistening bodies, individual and collective effort, and sublime ambience. Alexander's work was dark but not threatening because the steel men displayed were set firmly in the context of the city's renown. The appeal of Alexander's vigorous workers was shown clearly in dedication-day reviews in the booster press. The *Dispatch* interpreted the unmistakable "striving, straining" of the men as Alexander's marvelous recognition that the work of Pittsburgh's industrial laborers was "no child's play." The *Gazette Times* applauded the "stalwart, brawny, steel-muscled men" as fitting models of the city's workers, displaying the coordination and control that the Steel City demanded of its labor force. Their bodies were placed in an appropriately chaotic environment, with "the hot glare from the furnace . . . the ring of the hammer on the anvil, the cough of the exhaust, [and] the sizzling steel and twisting iron" producing a vivid sense of hard work. Caspar Clarke of *Everybody's* equated the figures' rippling muscles to "that of the Greek athlete" and spied intelligence in the faces of the workers, suggesting both the strength and mental faculties of the ideal Pittsburgh worker. Like the finely honed steel issuing forth from local steel mills, workers' bodies in *The Crowning of Labor* received a high quality grade as graceful representations.<sup>30</sup>

The intentional obscurity of industrial work in Alexander's mural complemented critics' perception of ideal work in Pittsburgh. Rather than complaining about the shadows and clouds that cloaked the production process, the establishment press appreciated the artist's hazy vision. The *Gazette Times* interpreted Alexander's mural as the "many forms of labor—the strenuous pushing, piling, lifting, pounding, straining work

<sup>30</sup> "The Crowning of Labor: The John White Alexander Mural Paintings in the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh," *Mentor* 13 (May 1925): 32; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 7 Apr. 1907; *Gazette Times*, 7 Apr. 1907; Caspar Purdon Clarke, "Study in Black and Green," *Everybody's* 21 (Sept. 1909): 425.

that has been, and still is, the basis of all the wonderful success that is Pittsburgh." The *Dispatch* agreed that the murals depicted "not the real labor" that took place in Pittsburgh, but the "inspiration" of labor. The art critic for the *Pittsburgh Post* believed that Alexander meant his working figures to be allegorical impressions of the work that took place in Pittsburgh, ignoring the trivial details of industry that might distract the viewer from the real show. The *Dispatch* equated the vague aura of work exhibited with the city's persistent air of wonder—Pittsburgh, too, was ethereal, figurative, but strong. The visual obscurity was thus fitting for the Steel City. Art critic Charles Caffin reasoned that although Alexander "avoided any direct illustration of actual processes of work," his murals were still highly "suggestive of the particular kind of labor identified with the industries of Pittsburgh." Clarke explained that "Alexander's workmen are not artist models, but such men as have built up Pittsburgh." Accordingly, Alexander noted that "many sources" told him that workers in Pittsburgh cherished the images, including one man who informed the artist "that he had never been happy in his work until after this thought had been made plain to him by its illustration on the walls of the institute." There is no clear evidence of workers' reception of Alexander's mural; the claim that the painted figures could redefine work for local laborers reveals little more than boosters' optimism that such displays could forge a community based on shared symbols. Yet the importance of working-class appreciation for the artist and the booster was itself a sign of promotional logic. Middle-class Pittsburghers were expected to love *The Crowning of Labor*; alleged working-class admirers were significant because they vouched that the inspirational image was also authentic. The mural was a medium of suggestion, urging viewers to believe in the redemptive qualities of heavy work and hard bodies.<sup>31</sup>

Blashfield's and Alexander's murals displayed two features that complemented boosters' goals. First, both settled for the worker's body, not a specific type of labor, as a symbol of industrial Pittsburgh. Blashfield's assembled iron and steelworkers displayed their hammers, and Alexander's men pushed and pulled through the steam, but their allusions to production processes gave no record of how work was actually performed. Instead, the presence of workers' bodies was enough to convey

<sup>31</sup> *Gazette Times*, 7 Apr. 1907; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 7 Apr. 1907; *Pittsburgh Post*, 7 Apr. 1907; Caffin, "The New Mural Decorations of John W. Alexander," 848; Clarke, "Study in Black and Green," 425; "The Crowning of Labor," 32.

the ideals of work: muscular and mental development and a confident, competent appearance. The world of work in each piece was enveloped in a favorable narrative—the city offering its achievements to the world; the world returning the favor with hymns of praise—that made displayed bodies markers of civic progress and class harmony. Secondly, in conveying a generic sense of work, the murals eschewed notions of the mechanical in favor of the pre-mechanical. Blashfield's image was decidedly artisanal, avoiding the machine and stressing the tools of the craftsman. Alexander incorporated mechanical aspects of work in his mural, yet writers and art critics in Pittsburgh ignored the visible devices in the mural and trained their eyes on the dozens of working men whose strain was timeless and unaffected by motors. For boosters, detailed chronicles of the actual work taking place throughout the city did not convey noble messages of Pittsburgh's significance.

*“Perfect Representation”: Pittsburgh's Sesquicentennial Parade*

The culmination of the boosters' twenty-year campaign to disseminate vital images of Pittsburgh came in the autumn of 1908, when the city celebrated its first one hundred fifty years of history as a frontier town turned industrial giant. The *Pittsburgh Dispatch* editorialized in the weeks before the sesquicentennial that it was essential that “the scores of thousands who will visit . . . especially on the day of the monster parade, with its floats illustrating the enormous business of this region, shall be impressed by the magnificence of the spectacle and go to their towns and homes and say that it was the greatest ever.” Parades, speeches, and historical recreations reinforced the power of the working figure in a mechanical context. Displays of industry that rolled through the streets of the Steel City in 1908 brought both the worker's body and machinery to the foreground in a way that had not been attempted before. Boosters presented the industrial machine as a harmless and liberating force, demonstrating manufacturers' decision that machines and working men could be depicted in harmony without diminishing the appeal of the latter. The revelry of 1908 integrated fully the mechanical milieu into the tale of skilled workers' physical mastery with questionable results.<sup>32</sup>

As the fifth day of the sesquicentennial festivities, the historical, mili-

<sup>32</sup> *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 20 Sept. 1908.

tary, and industrial parade scheduled for October 1 was to be the most “beautiful and instructive” attraction of the week-long event. Proportions mattered in the organization of the parade, for the procession bore the burden of representing the power of “Greater Pittsburgh,” a municipal unit recently created by the city’s annexation of neighboring towns. More than just marching workers and administrators, then, the October 1 parade featured eight distinct divisions and as many as thirty thousand participants. An estimated three hundred thousand people amassed on the streets of Pittsburgh that morning to first view the city’s police force and regiments of the National Guard, followed by divisions of politicians, civic leaders, and historical floats that presented scenes of warfare and settlement. This was apparently a mere preamble to the main attraction; the *Dispatch* stated that the “best part of the pageant, from the spectacular standpoint,” was the display of elaborate floats created for the labor and manufacturing divisions. Sixteen companies and organizations erected twenty-foot, horse-drawn floats which, according to the *Dispatch*, were the “highest type” of representation of the city’s industries. The sesqui-centennial committee urged companies to avoid crass advertisement and instead stress the brilliance of the city and the instruction of its people.<sup>33</sup>

One float in particular struck boosters as an ideal symbol of Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century, mixing men and machinery in an impressive, if ambiguous manner. The Jones and Laughlin Steel Company float, which several commentators singled out as the most impressive display of the labor division, reproduced a Bessemer converter in the height of a chemical reaction. One end of the float featured a heaping pile of iron ore, while the opposite end housed the converter and a spray of liquid steel shooting from its opening. Jones and Laughlin positioned the mock-converter on its side, aiming a stream of sparks above the workers’ heads. At the workers’ feet lay the products of steel manufacturing, beams, chains, and wagon wheels. The three workers riding on the float were framed by the converter, sparks, ore, and products, positioned on a small stage that encompassed the beginning and end of the work process. But what was the practical function of the workers in the middle? Here, again, the steelworkers’ work was elided in favor of their bodily presence. The reporter for the *Dispatch* noted that “big muscled steelworkers were

<sup>33</sup> Sidney A. King, W. H. Stevenson, and R. W. Johnston, eds., *The Story of the Sesqui-Centennial Celebration of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1910), 12, 156; *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 27 Sept. 1908, 2 Oct. 1908; *Official Municipal Program of the Sesqui-Centennial Celebration of the City of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh, 1908); *Pittsburgh Post*, 2 Oct. 1908.

placed about” the converter, like props that accompanied the main set piece. The writer’s choice of the passive voice was significant, for it implied that men had been treated as inanimate objects, icons that by 1908 had become so utilized in Pittsburgh that their role in public pageantry was accepted as just that, a role. Their bodies were needed for the display, but their knowledge of industrial work was not. They were put in place to provide a context for the machinery, to let their bodies suggest what work in Pittsburgh meant.<sup>34</sup>

Far from reading depressing signs of inactivity in the Jones and Laughlin float, however, boosters responded enthusiastically to its tale of Steel City work. The *Dispatch* writer judged the float to be a “perfect representation” of both steelmaking and Pittsburgh, exhibiting the power of both man and machine. A sesquicentennial souvenir book remembered the float as “most typical of Pittsburgh, and one that few dreamed could be produced for a moving stage.” Such floats “charmed and educated,” teaching the assembled throngs how to think of the city. Even though the Bessemer converter was slightly anachronistic, having been supplanted by the open-hearth furnace as the chief steel-making vessel in Pittsburgh, the historical vision that the float provided was meant to resonate with the city’s middle class. By 1908, bodies and machines could appear together in public displays to impart some semblance of industrial harmony, but the results were mixed, emphasizing the fact that machinery had changed irrevocably the nature of work. The Jones and Laughlin float suggested that work in Pittsburgh was now as much inaction as action. If the “perfect representation” of the city’s working life did not discourage parade organizers and professional commentators, it was because their faith in the physiques “placed about” the representation had never flagged. Pittsburgh’s civic narrative still relied on bodies of work, even if work did not rely on them as much as it once had.<sup>35</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The grand theme of these displays was that Pittsburgh rewarded its workers by making their bodies objects of respect and awe. The severe representational burdens placed on the individual body at the turn of the

<sup>34</sup> *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, 2 Oct. 1908.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*; King, Stevenson, and Johnston, eds., *Story of the Sesqui-Centennial*, 161.

century could generate a sense of general crisis, but they could also motivate an amorphous group of civic-minded writers, entrepreneurs, and officials to coordinate a symbolic assault to stave off potential signs of weakness. By the turn of the century, a city booster could have confidence in the claim that Pittsburgh “means toil inconceivable, but it also means wages and good living and comfort and luxuries for thousands and tens of thousands,” because the claim appeared to be validated time and again in work-spectacles and physical displays that pleased a public composed of diverse classes and ethnic groups. Images meant to promote the “bee-hive of energy”—images of “happy and cheerful, strong and healthy” workers—were products of decades of work by civic groups that tried to market industrial goods, financial investments, and the identity of a city by appealing to the extraordinary physical culture of its work.<sup>36</sup>

If Pittsburgh was the apotheosis of American industrial civilization at the turn of the century, then the sight of the industrial worker in action was the apotheosis of Pittsburgh. Although representations of men’s bodies have been noted for their ability to “deflect anxiety,” it was initially the work skills for which the bodies stood, not the bodies themselves, that allayed fears in Pittsburgh. Workers’ bodies came to the foreground when boosters found it advantageous to present the city’s middle class and its workers with iconography that ignored the highly mechanized, strictly divided, and visually tedious work that typified industrial Pittsburgh. By 1908 the link between the bodies displayed and middle-class knowledge of the work performed by them was tenuous at best. Modernity and advanced industry brought with them a “surplus of signifiers and a dearth of signification,” heightening the artifice behind the images but also allowing for more ambitious spectacles. The desire for educational displays persisted in the Steel City after 1900. The focus on an actual work process in the Pittsburgh Expositions of the 1890s and the arrangement of workers’ bodies in parades and public art was not enough to appease critics of the city’s self-marketing. Three weeks after the sesquicentennial the *Pittsburgh Sun* reminded readers, “It will be a great thing for education and manufacturing, too, when our industrial expositions consist less of floats in parades or fragmentary processes on exhibition in ‘machinery halls,’ and more of visits to plants in actual operation.” Many still believed that sporadic celebrations and artworks

<sup>36</sup> WPES, *Pittsburgh Exposition* (Pittsburgh, 1899); SIACP (1880), 195; Mellon Bank, *Pittsburgh: 1758–1908* (Pittsburgh, 1908).

could never provide the same sense of Pittsburgh that one could get from seeing its work “daily exercised.”<sup>37</sup>

A sense of nostalgia informed Pittsburgh boosters’ promotional images. As work changed and the Steel City garnered fame for the results of those changes, the local business and cultural elite emphasized that which was disappearing, the highly skilled manual working man whose tasks were obviated or replicated by massive machinery. The nostalgia of the city’s work iconography was devoted to a bygone era that was not yet actually gone, but seemed to be slipping away by the minute. Viewed most optimistically, male skilled workers’ bodies gave a sense of history to a forward-looking city, a sense of cross-class affinity to an industrial district torn by social antagonisms, and a sense of solid, white manliness to an area inundated with perceived threats from foreign arrivals. Viewed less generously, bodily displays obscured the danger and exploitation of the workplace, reinforced physical and cultural stigmas attached to recent immigrants, and attempted to drive a symbolic wedge between the city’s skilled and unskilled workforces. Historian Linda Tomko noted that turn-of-the-century Americans exhibited a particularly keen desire to “capture the body; to make the body stable for a moment; to address its (knowable) needs.” In Pittsburgh, the body of the industrial worker was captured time and again, held motionless while those who wished to understand Pittsburgh (or, those who wished *others* to understand Pittsburgh) charted its strengths and weaknesses. In doing so, boosters also held in the spotlight ideas about work and the city that fostered it. The working body frequently appeared in public moments of celebration as a way to focus attention on the quotidian aspects of city life that, in the service of an economic and political agenda, became representative of the city as a whole.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Carol Wolkowitz, “The Working Body as a Sign: Historical Snapshots,” in *Constructing Gendered Bodies*, ed. Kathryn Backett-Milburn and Linda McKie (New York, 2001), 87; Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge, 1991), 2; *Pittsburgh Sun*, 21 Oct. 1908; Scaife, “A Glimpse of Pittsburg,” 87.

<sup>38</sup> Linda J. Tomko, *Dancing Class: Gender, Ethnicity, and Social Divides in American Dance, 1890–1920* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999), xvi.